

Romney and Obama Strain to Show Gap on Foreign Policy
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By Peter Baker

WASHINGTON — In his latest broadside against the incumbent's foreign policy, Mitt Romney blamed President Obama for the Arab uprisings last year, arguing that he could have headed them off by pressing the region's autocrats to reform first.

"President Obama abandoned the freedom agenda," Mr. Romney told the newspaper Israel Hayom, referring to President George W. Bush's democracy policy, "and we are seeing today a whirlwind of tumult in the Middle East in part because these nations did not embrace the reforms that could have changed the course of their history in a more peaceful manner."

The critique was the latest attempt by the presumptive Republican candidate to undercut Mr. Obama's handling of international affairs. But once the incendiary flourishes are stripped away, the actual foreign policy differences between the two seem more a matter of degree and tone than the articulation of a profound debate about the course of America in the world today.

In the interview with the Israeli newspaper, owned by Sheldon Adelson, the American casino mogul and Republican financier, Mr. Romney offered no substantive policies for how he would have dealt with Arab governments differently. Neither does he have much history as a Bush-style freedom agenda advocate. Despite the campaign positioning, on the most fundamental international issues, the president and his challenger generally share the same goals, even if they would get there in different ways.

They both would press the battle against Al Qaeda through drones and special operations while drawing down troops in Afghanistan. They both would try to stop Iran's nuclear program through sanctions and negotiations without ruling out a military option. They both would support rebels in Syria while keeping American forces out of the conflict. Even in areas where Mr. Romney has been most critical, like Israel, Russia and China, it is not entirely clear what he would do differently.

It may be, then, that the real test on foreign policy this year is how voters assess the candidates in terms of their leadership, experience, strength and agility. In other words, the argument may come down to who would be more effective pursuing the same aims, who would do better at asserting American will, rallying allies and confronting adversaries, who would find the right blend of diplomacy and assertiveness.

That is not to say there are no differences; there certainly are. Mr. Obama, for instance, envisions eventually ridding the world of nuclear weapons, while Mr. Romney has dismissed the president's arms control treaty with Russia as dangerously reckless.

But broadly, their differences are less radical than the campaign trail dialogue makes them sound and do not compare to the seismic debates over the Iraq war that consumed Washington in the middle of the last decade.

"Iraq has taken off the table the most profound foreign policy differences," said P. J. Crowley, who worked on Bill Clinton's National Security Council and in Mr. Obama's State Department. "There's more continuity in foreign policy than people realize."

The disparity between language and policy is reminiscent of past elections when candidates accentuated differences but found the range of options available to them not all that different once the election was over. When it comes to foreign policy, what is said on the campaign trail sometimes bears only a faint resemblance to what happens in the Situation Room.

Mr. Clinton attacked President George Bush over China in 1992, only to normalize trade relations with Beijing once in office. George W. Bush in 2000 criticized Mr. Clinton, accusing him of cozying up to Russia, only to forge a friendship with Vladimir V. Putin before their eventual falling out. And Mr. Obama harshly criticized Mr. Bush's counterterrorism policies in 2008, only to preserve many of them, at least in modified form.

This year, listening to the candidates and their surrogates, it often seems as if the debate is about who can offer the most vigorous affirmation of American greatness. To the extent that it gets any deeper, the debate centers on who has more credibility wielding American power.

"If you do not want America to be the strongest nation on earth, I am not your president," Mr. Romney told the Veterans of Foreign Wars last week. "You have that president today."

Vice President Joseph R. Biden Jr. fired back at Mr. Romney. "When he does venture a position," he said, "it's a safe bet that he previously took exactly the opposite position and will probably change his mind again and land in the wrong place, far out of the mainstream."

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